

Units of Time

B. Leslie Robinson, Jr.

Introduction

James Wind, President of the Alban Institute, states, “Before there was Microsoft, Federal Express, the fax machine, dot-coms, the Internet, the cell phone, cable TV, the Palm Pilot, or voice mail, there was ‘free time.’”

Wind goes on to cite a study conducted by Juliet Schor which indicates that despite all of the efficiencies and economies that have come from our new technologies, the average worker added 164 hours per year (the equivalent of one full month of eight-hour work days), to his or her workload. He then writes,

All of the old ways that free time used to be protected – darkness at the end of a day, Sabbaths, and Sundays, set aside by communities for worship and non-work, vacations that separated people from their regular routines, holidays – all of them are under siege by the 24/7 workplace, the always open mail, the ever present cell phone and laptop. No time is automatically sacred or set aside. The great danger is that all time can become the same, that life really can become unending striving for more – money, pleasure, success, experience, power. [*Congregations: The Alban Journal*. Bethesda, MD, volume 25, number 4, July-August, 2000]

Challenges

The phrase “24/7 Lifestyle” may have been introduced by corporate America, but it was invented by clergy. Somehow, clergy persons got the idea that they were the only individuals who could deal with the needs of the church. Consequently, they determined that they had to be present (or prepared to be present) for whatever reasons and under whatever circumstances at a moment’s notice. And, congregations, not wanting to disappoint their ministers, gladly adopted the concept!

There are times when clergy need to be present. There are circumstances that require the minister to respond in ways that no one else in the congregation can respond. However, more often than not, clergy use of time has been abused – both by the clergy and by the congregation.

Time is a unique resource. It cannot be accumulated or stockpiled. We are forced to spend it at a fixed rate of 60 seconds every minute. We cannot turn it off and on; it is irretrievable. In the now classic management book, *The Effective Executive*, author Peter Drucker wrote, “Time is the scarcest resource and unless it is managed nothing else can be managed” [Peter F. Drucker, *The Effective Executive*, HarperCollins Publisher, 2006; original work copyrighted in 1967].

The truth is, we really cannot “manage” time, but we can manage ourselves with respect to the

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use of time. In numerous research projects the same time-wasters emerge: unclear objectives, poor information; procrastination; lack of planning; telephone; email; meetings; lack of priorities; unable to say “no;” and lack of self-discipline. It takes a brutally honest reassessment and a willingness to be self-critical for most of us to see how much of our ineffectiveness with regard to time usage is caused by ourselves. Wayne Oates, writing about “workaholics,” stated that a person usually finds out that he/she is a workaholic when he/she has a heart attack or his/her 5 year-old child asks for an appointment to see him/her!

People who consistently devote more than 45 to 55 hours a week to their jobs are in serious danger of impairing their efficiency. Multiple studies show that productivity declines rapidly after eight hours of work. Long hours also encourage us to adopt the attitude that “there is no great press to get something done because there is always tonight” [R. Alec Mackenzie, *Time Trap*, AMACOM, revised 1997].

Someone has said that the biggest thief of time is indecision. Handling matters multiple times ends up wasting time. We need to be willing to stay with the task and complete it so that it is handled only once.

Clergy easily fall into the “fallacy of omnipotence” syndrome. Believing that no one else can do a task quite as effectively as we can is a critical mistake. Not bringing others in on routine tasks such as administration and visitation guarantees that you always will have to be the one to do it.

Units of Time Concept

A critical area of ministry is the setting of appropriate boundaries, and the use of time is both a boundary and a self-care issue. Clergy can be assisted with time boundaries by using “**Units of Time.**” This practice allows you to determine how your time needs to be used - and may help you discover where it actually goes. While not designed to be a time log or inventory, it can become one. When an individual discovers their actual “discretionary time,” it may help them to make better use of all of their time.

Units of time recognize each day as three distinct blocks of time: morning, afternoon, and evening. Therefore, the week is divided into twenty-one units. For the general population, full time is considered 10 units (2 units on each of 5 days). A healthy number of units for a pastor to maintain on a regular basis is 10-12, although circumstances may occasionally require more. Notice that these time blocks are not expressed in the language of hours and minutes. That is intentional. In the corporate world, time is tied to profit and productivity, so some individuals will immediately want to make the conversion. Ministry, however, is different in terms of time. Working more hours will not produce more products and/or more income; it will produce more burnout.

Using units of time provide a clearer picture of activities and commitments. A breakfast meeting on Monday morning may last one or two hours, but it prevents or limits other activities from

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happening during that morning block. A 2:00 p.m. wedding on Saturday may only last an hour, but the minister is not free to take a cross-town trip at noon, in hopes of getting back for the big event. A meeting with church leaders on Tuesday evening may be scheduled for 90 minutes, but in all likelihood you will not be able to meet your family or friends for dinner afterwards.

Equally important is that dealing with units of time helps clergy to use their time more efficiently and effectively. Knowing that my evening will be tied up for a two-hour meeting challenges me to put other tasks in front of, or behind that time. For instance, the minister may go to the church at 6:00 p.m. and make phone calls until the 7:00 p.m. meeting, or use that hour to prepare for the meeting itself. This frees up other blocks for other matters, including personal time.

Including time for planning often is the most neglected part of our work. Without planning, however, our results will come more from luck than good management. This includes planning for each day as well as planning for the future. Using units of time also helps us plan for certain events rather than leaving them to chance. If Monday afternoon is scheduled for hospital and/or parishioner visitation time, then we are less likely to let something else find its way into the schedule. Protecting Thursday morning for sermon preparation ensures that Saturday evening will not be spent in panic (or at least in TOTAL panic). In the end, planning time saves time.

Practical Practice

Daily. A good practice is to end each work day by writing down the most important tasks you have to do tomorrow and number them in order of importance. When you arrive the next day, begin at once on the number 1 priority and stay on it until it is completed. If a task takes all day, that is okay - stick with it as long as it is the most important one. When completed, recheck your priorities and then begin with number 2. If a true emergency/crisis arises, deal with it. Then return to the prioritized task.

Future. You are not the vision-caster, but you are the vision-bearer. Without taking time to plan ways to carry out the church's vision, it will not happen. You may have a group with whom you work on future planning, both staff and laity. But, never go to those meetings empty-handed.

Plan A and Plan B. Clergy do need to respond to emergencies at various times. The units of time concept is our Plan A and does not establish time for emergencies. Plan B is what we will do if an emergency arises, and how we will catch up with what was originally planned. One suggestion is to have a second circle of pastoral care – other people who can help with emergencies and crises as well as routine calls. Plan B allows us to keep track of those “interrupted” times and makes provisions for catching up with other blocks. Many people do not know that you sat with a family on Wednesday from 2:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m. while emergency surgery was being performed on a loved one. But, being able to keep track of that allows you to recognize it and honor your own need to take off on Thursday afternoon, without feeling guilty or apologizing for taking care of yourself.

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Personal Time. Keeping track of a work schedule in this manner encourages (ensures?) personal time off. Put an “X” in at least 6 units each week for personal time, with at least 3 of those units being consecutive blocks and at least 4 evenings having an “X.” Putting an “X” in those blocks makes you aware that you intentionally are not doing something else. It also helps prevent other activities from encroaching on that time. Additionally, the units of time method of scheduling enables personal time to rotate or “float” from week to week. For example, if Saturday morning and afternoon is regularly devoted to personal time, and a wedding is scheduled for next weekend, then you may decide to block out two consecutive units on Monday for personal time.

Flexibility. Units of time eliminate the thinking that I need the same basic schedule every week. In ministry, there is no typical week. So, planning each week can be refreshing. It keeps my schedule in front of me so that I am not easily distracted. It allows me to plan “30 minute projects and to work on those big challenges at the time of day when I have the most energy.

Compensation. Units of time provide a basis for negotiating compensation. Some churches want a minister for less than full time. Under this system, a work schedule and compensation plan can be established as a percentage of units being worked as compared to full time. It also gives the church leadership a clearer picture of what they can anticipate for half-time (5-6 units) or three-quarter time (8-9 units) ministry.

Accountability. Another benefit of the units of time process relates to accountability. As ministers, we certainly are accountable to God; we are accountable to our congregations as well. Ministers often get into difficulty with congregations because of failing to meet expectations. Keeping track of the way we use our time can help us establish reasonable expectations for our families, our ministry, and our personal needs. This is a major benefit to both clergy and laity.

Summary

The units of time concept is not intended to become a legalistic approach to time management. It is not a suggestion that every time the minister experiences a last minute “extra” meeting that they change the entire schedule for the week. That is why ministers often work 12 units each week versus a 10-unit schedule. But, units of time do make the individual aware of when they are stepping outside of appropriate boundaries. Using units of time is both helpful and healthy. It provides a way to adjust as the demands grow larger.

On the following pages are two charts. One provides an example of units of time and the other is a worksheet for personal use.

B. Leslie Robinson, Jr. has worked with the Center for Congregational Health® since 1993, assisting congregations and clergy with transitional issues, search committee training, strategic planning, team building, leadership transitions, group facilitation, and conflict management.

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UNITS OF TIME – EXAMPLE

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
Worship	Staff Meeting and Office Hours	X	Planning	Sermon Preparation	X	X
Hospital Visitation and/or Office Hours	X	Office Hours	Hospital Visitation and/or Office Hours	Office Hours	Hospital Visitation and/or Office Hours	X
Worship	X	Committee Meeting or Member Visitation	Prayer Meeting	X	X	X

- Each major section of the day is a unit - morning, afternoon, evening
- A full time job is 10 units; ministers maintain 10-12 units on a regular basis
- An 'X' indicates personal time off; need at least 6 blocks for personal time, including at least 3 consecutive blocks, and no more than three evenings per week
- Use units as a measure of how much you are willing to work and compute compensation on a percentage of the units compared with a full time minister